VISIT…

CHASING THE LOOK

10 WAYS TO IMPROVE THE AESTHETICS OF YOUR PHOTOGRAPHS

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Author of ***Within The Frame***

Introduction

I was 14 years old when I began making photographs; I bought a Voigtlander rangefinder at a neighbor's yard sale and fell in love. I'm still falling in love with images and the process of making them. I'm still learning to discover my own vision and evolving in the ways in which I use the camera to express it. More and more I see this as a journey, hence the subtitle of my first book, *Within The Frame, The Journey of Photographic Vision*. I suspect it's a journey for all of us because if photography is a means by which we express ourselves, and we ourselves are always growing, learning, journeying, then our photography can do nothing but move with us, grow with us, and change as our vision & experience of the world changes.

I mention all that because it's what brought me to start writing the books, articles, and ebooks I've been so furiously writing over these last two years. I began a craft that I knew to be about expression but I learned it from a purely technical means. It has taken me over twenty years to come to the place where I recognize the primacy of vision over technique, of principles instead of rules; those simple discoveries have brought me to re-learn everything about my craft.

If I could go back in time and have a conversation with the teenager I once was, I'd perch on the edge of the bathtub in the red glow of the ad hoc darkroom and beg him to stop chasing technical perfection and start chasing an aesthetic that really says something. I wouldn't even try convincing him not to buy that monstrous Soligor 400mm lens with a mind-numbing maximum aperture of f/8, because I know he wouldn't listen. But I would encourage him to pursue a different goal; one that considers two important questions, "What

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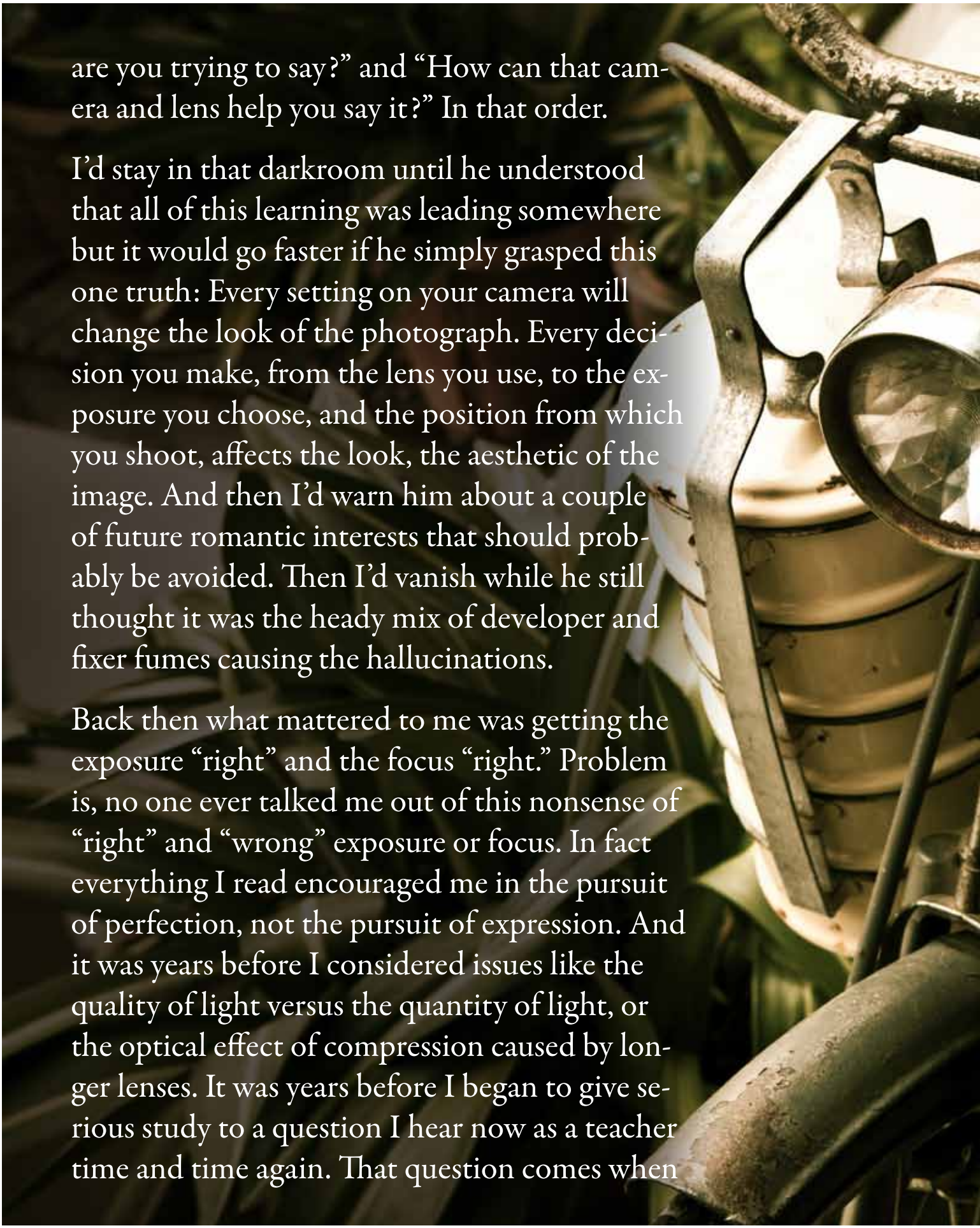
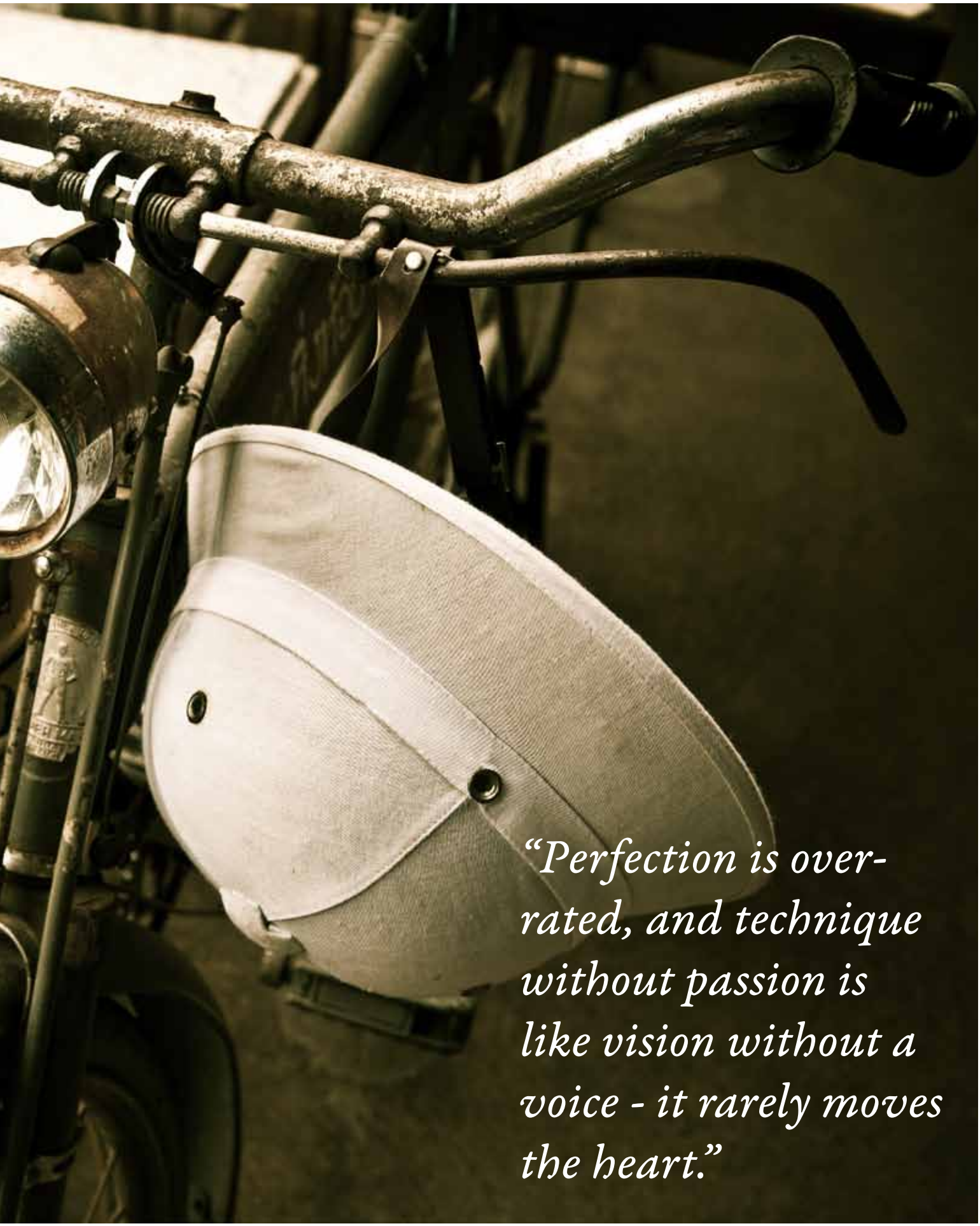


are you trying to say?" and "How can that camera and lens help you say it?" In that order.

I'd stay in that darkroom until he understood that all of this learning was leading somewhere but it would go faster if he simply grasped this one truth: Every setting on your camera will change the look of the photograph. Every decision you make, from the lens you use, to the exposure you choose, and the position from which you shoot, affects the look, the aesthetic of the image. And then I'd warn him about a couple of future romantic interests that should probably be avoided. Then I'd vanish while he still thought it was the heady mix of developer and fixer fumes causing the hallucinations.

Back then what mattered to me was getting the exposure "right" and the focus "right." Problem is, no one ever talked me out of this nonsense of "right" and "wrong" exposure or focus. In fact everything I read encouraged me in the pursuit of perfection, not the pursuit of expression. And it was years before I considered issues like the quality of light versus the quantity of light, or the optical effect of compression caused by longer lenses. It was years before I began to give serious study to a question I hear now as a teacher time and time again. That question comes when


"Perfection is over-rated, and technique without passion is like vision without a voice - it rarely moves the heart."

a younger photographer, and by that I mean younger in the craft, is looking at work he admires and says, "How come my photographs don't look like that?"

The usual assumption, even if it's merely unspoken, is that those photographs "look like that" because the photographer is

(a) a genius

(b) has access to better gear

(c) heavily involved in VooDoo and says gibberish incantations before pressing the button.

We assume they have a secret sauce, or magic technique that we do not. And this leads us to all kinds of dark places creatively. It leads us to buy more gear without changing how we use it. It leads us to doubt and discouragement instead of a new path of learning, creativity, and experimentation. It leads us to spend hours and hours learning new Photoshop techniques, or hundreds of dollars on plug-ins. It does not lead us to the one place we should be heading - a place where we learn that every decision we make - EVERY decision - changes the look of the photograph. Cameras and lenses are no more than machines that do our bidding. What every photographer you admire has done, in terms of the look of the image, you can do too.

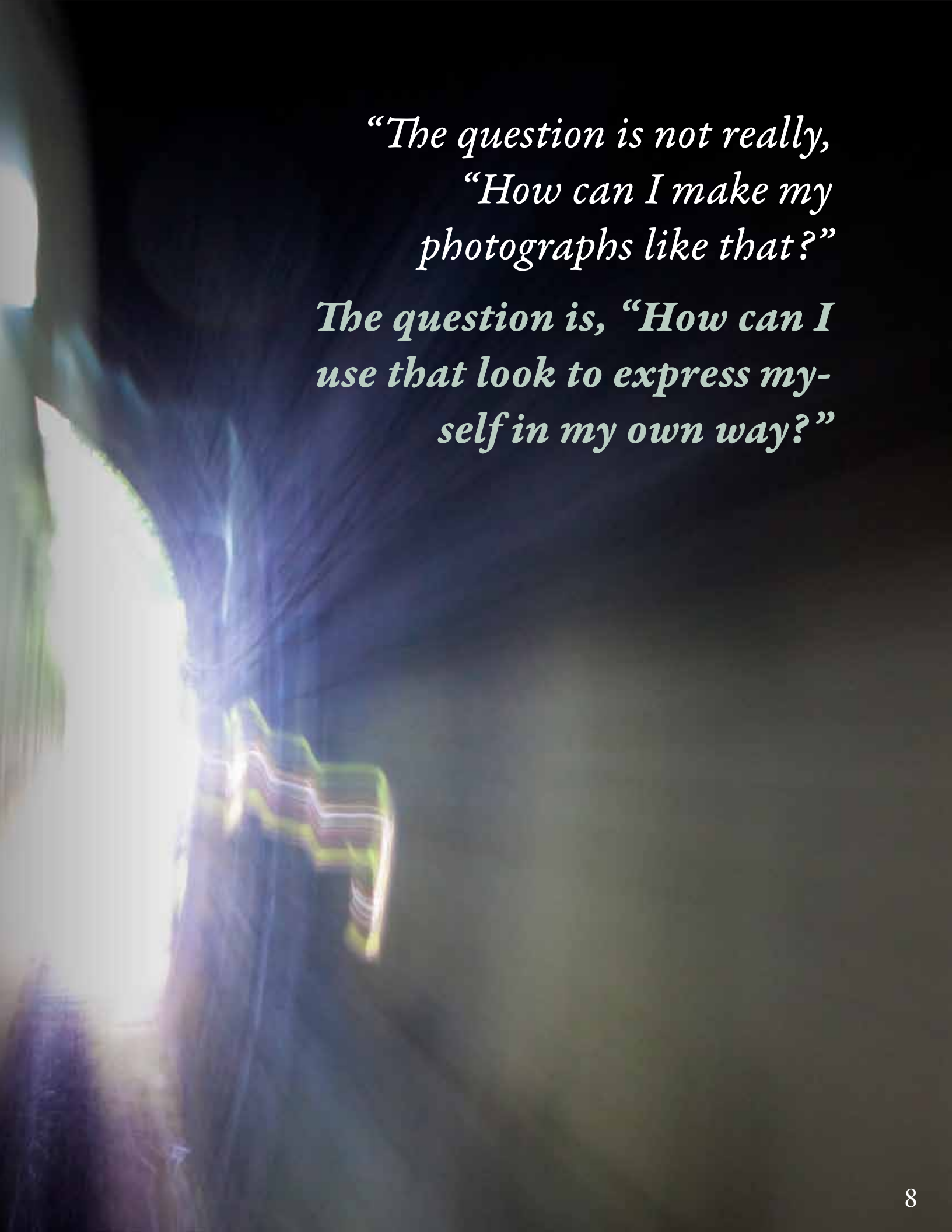
That's not to say you should. You should be learning to express yourself in ways that are unique to you and consistent with your own vision. But much in the creative world begins with emulation and if that's the door to discovering and mastering technique before you set off to use those techniques to express yourself, then more power to you. But know that we all fall into ruts when we're looking for our groove and if you spend too much time emulating the voice of Ansel Adams, you've got less time to find your own voice.

This short book is about the aesthetic, the look, the meeting place of the Artist and the Geek,

a concept I began fleshing out in *Within The Frame*. This is where those two sides of a photographer's personality find common ground. The aesthetic of the image is the artist's HOW? and the geek's WHY?

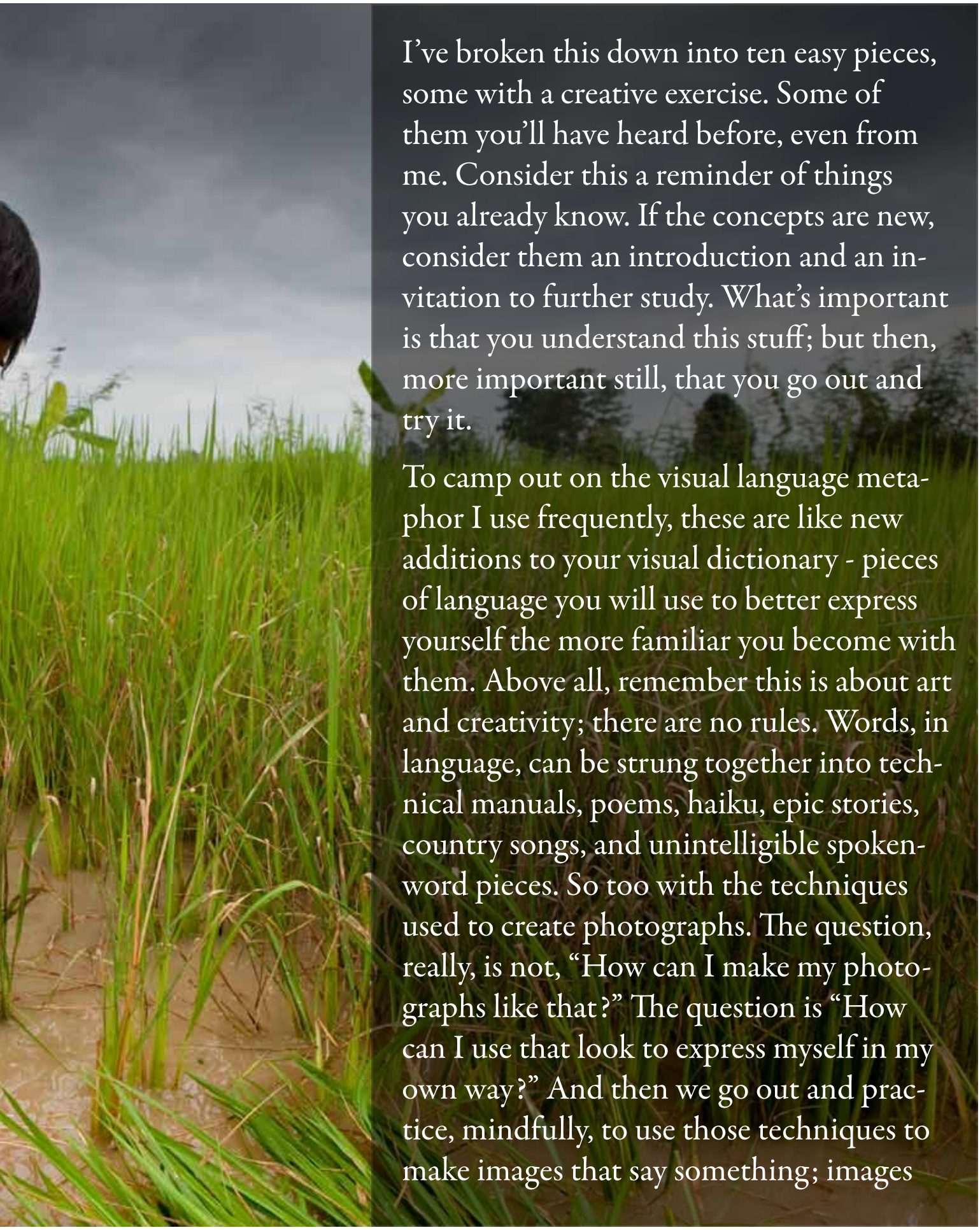
So returning to my imagined travel back to see my younger self at the beginning of this journey, I wouldn't for a moment suggest he change his course, only his focus. I'd let him learn this stuff by trial and error, let him discover his voice and his vision with time as we all do. I'd just remind him that every decision he makes affects the look, and that expression was the end goal, not perfection. Perfection is over-rated, and technique without passion is like vision without a voice - it rarely moves the heart.

And then I'd appear to my old high school photography teacher and beg him to teach younger-me the ten things in this book. If the lessons here seem like familiar sermons, it's because in some form they appear in much of my other teaching. There just isn't that much innovation in basic photographic technique. We don't need new techniques, we need to master the foundational techniques we already have.



"The question is not really, "How can I make my photographs like that?"

The question is, "How can I use that look to express myself in my own way?"



I've broken this down into ten easy pieces, some with a creative exercise. Some of them you'll have heard before, even from me. Consider this a reminder of things you already know. If the concepts are new, consider them an introduction and an invitation to further study. What's important is that you understand this stuff; but then, more important still, that you go out and try it.

To camp out on the visual language metaphor I use frequently, these are like new additions to your visual dictionary - pieces of language you will use to better express yourself the more familiar you become with them. Above all, remember this is about art and creativity; there are no rules. Words, in language, can be strung together into technical manuals, poems, haiku, epic stories, country songs, and unintelligible spoken-word pieces. So too with the techniques used to create photographs. The question, really, is not, "How can I make my photographs like that?" The question is "How can I use that look to express myself in my own way?" And then we go out and practice, mindfully, to use those techniques to make images that say something; images

where every setting is intentionally chosen because the resulting look is intentionally chosen.

Let me be uncharacteristically direct with you - to get good, truly good, at a craft means you immerse yourself in it. You will not read this book and suddenly create images with the kind of look you've been pursuing, as though the information itself were all you were missing. Immersion means you stew in this stuff so much you are saturated by it, that you go for a walk and mentally look at things through different lenses, framing scenes in your mind and choosing apertures. It means you begin to drive your spouse nuts because you're always pointing out the light and marvelling at it. It means you interact with your work, and the work of others, on an intentional level so that you become intuitively aware of this stuff.

There is no shortage of educational stuff out there, and much of it is kindly encouraging; we all need that at times. We also need someone to be blunt and direct with us, someone who tells us that all the know-how in the world doesn't amount to a hill of beans until we pry our ass out of bed or off the sofa and work hard and intelligently at this stuff. I said that you too can accomplish the aesthetic (if not the vision) of any photographer you admire, and I mean it. But they didn't get there without working their ass off and we won't either. Let's get to it.

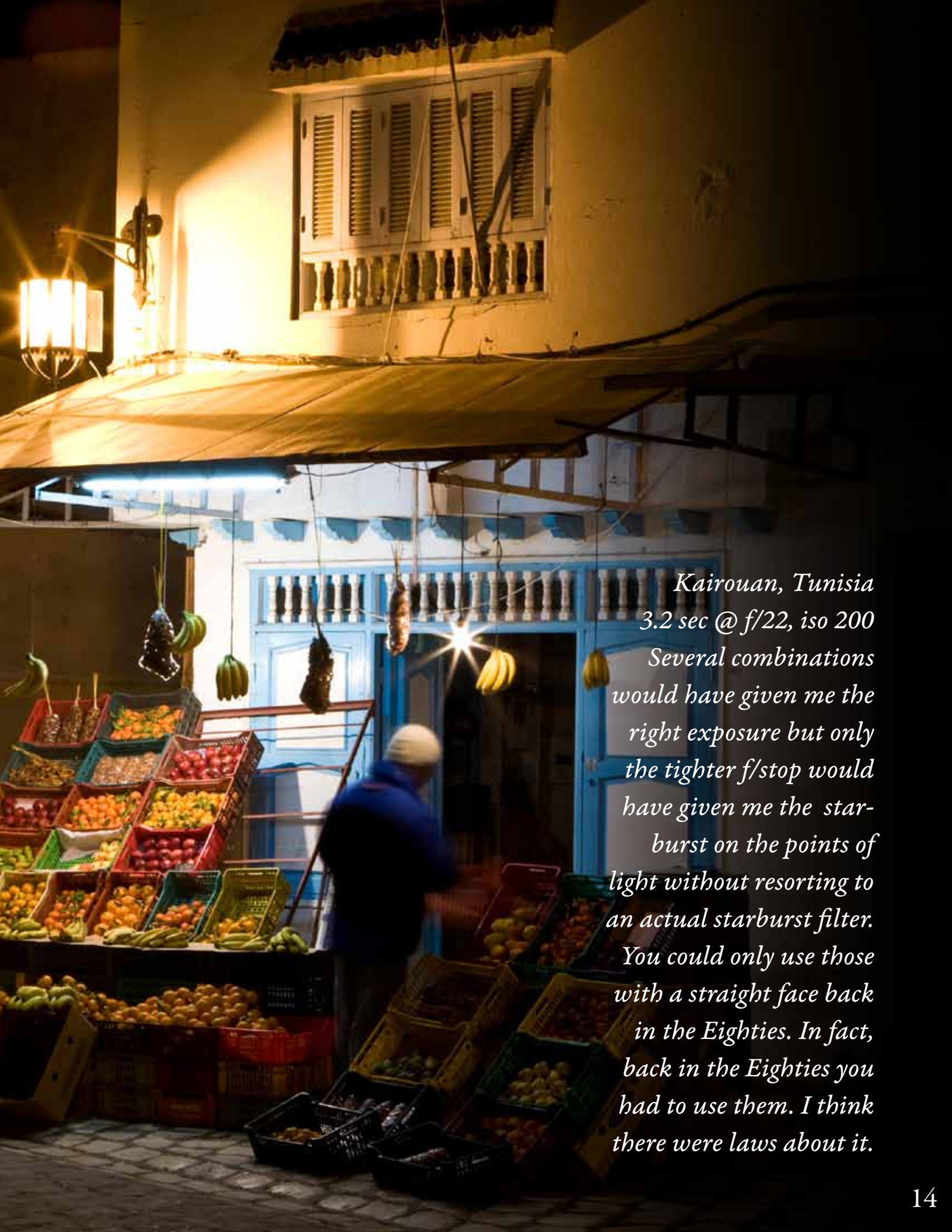
It's all about the look.

"We assume they have a secret sauce, or magic technique that we do not. And this leads us to all kinds of dark places creatively. It leads us to doubt and discouragement instead of a new path of learning, creativity, and experimentation. "

GET THE BEST AMOUNT OF LIGHT **BUT IN THE BEST WAY**

The technical side of photography gets discouragingly complicated at times. And unnecessarily so, I think. The issue of exposure takes up whole books, and given the fact that the technology still hasn't really caught up with our eye's ability to perceive such a broad range from light to dark, it's important that we make good choices about how much light we let into our camera. But if you're shooting digitally, and if you're shooting RAW and using a post-production software like Lightroom or Aperture, then exposure is a relatively simple matter.

First, you need to understand that the goal in exposing a digital image - assuming the above assumptions - is not to get a digital negative that looks right on the LCD. It's to get a digital negative that contains the most amount of digital information, which in turn gives you a negative with the most amount of quality, and flexibility in the refinement process.



Kairouan, Tunisia
3.2 sec @ f/22, iso 200
Several combinations would have given me the right exposure but only the tighter f/stop would have given me the star-burst on the points of light without resorting to an actual starburst filter. You could only use those with a straight face back in the Eighties. In fact, back in the Eighties you had to use them. I think there were laws about it.

You do this by looking not at your preview image on the LCD but at the histogram. Here's what you need to know, and I'll be brief because this isn't actually the point of the lesson. A histogram represents the light you've captured, in tonal values, in this one image. If the graph is too far left you've recorded a very dark scene, if too far right, a very light scene.

What is perhaps not apparent to most until you read up on it, is that the further right you go on the histogram, the more digital information is stored there. If the best digital negative is the one with the most information, then pushing that histogram as far right as possible, generally without going off the far end, will give you that.

I suggest you read this article on my blog: Pixelatedimage.com/blog/2009/08/exposure-and-metering/ for a more detailed look at this. But as I said, this isn't about that.

Learning to read your histogram is vital for creating a good digital negative with the most amount of data. Of course, had I taught this to the 16-year old version of me he'd have thought I was crazy. I shot then with a Pentax Spotmatic, which even when I got it was nearing 20 years old, a predecessor of the K-1000.

So while the means were different, the lesson would be the same - the goal is not only to get the best amount of light into the camera, but to consider very intentionally

how it gets there - because each twist of the aperture ring or nudge of the shutter dial did more than create an exposure - light or dark - it created a look and feel in other ways.

I was taught to get the right exposure and move on. I had to unlearn this lesson. For any exposure there are an astonishing number of combinations of settings that will get me there. I'm lousy at math but the formula would involve some kind of multiplication of the number of possible f-stops, shutter speeds, and ISO values. Math aside, there's a lot of options. And each combination that gives you the desired exposure will result in a different aesthetic.

Don't dismiss this. The choice between one f/stop and another in a photograph is akin to the choice between one word or another in song. Some differences are subtle, some change the meaning entirely.

Don't for a minute listen to the voice that says it'll *only make the picture look a little different*, because that is exactly the point of this whole thing. The look. It matters. It definitely matters. The difference between good and great is that *just a little bit*.

Why did my images not "look like that" for years when I compared them against stronger images? Among other reasons, the photographer who shot those stronger frames was very intentional about HOW he got his desired exposure, and I was not.

DEPTH OF FIELD

Read your light meter. Set the shutter speed. Select an aperture. Focus and click. If only it were that easy. But it's not. There's a dance to be done when you set that shutter speed and choose an aperture. And it has nothing to do with how much light you get into the camera. Well, it does, but the exact settings you choose are up to you. It's that choice and your ability to say something with the resulting aesthetic that makes this craft capable of producing art. And it's for this reason I choose to shoot most of the time on Aperture Priority because it is the aperture that has the most direct affect on the aesthetic I prefer in my photographs. My ability to limit the attention of the viewer and say, "look here, but not here"or "this matters, but this does not," is an important part of the way I choose to tell my stories.

What matters is that no one looks at my image and asks "Why did you shoot it at f/16?" only to have me shrug my shoulders. "I dunno." I must know! I must be conscious of each element affecting the look of my image and as there will be a profound difference in the look of the image at f/1.2 and f/8.0, I must be aware that I'm choosing one and therefore not choosing the other. To do otherwise is to admit you don't care about the aesthetic of the image in that way, and that's fine too; but it's a deliberate choice and you can't paint with red and then later wonder why your canvas isn't blue. Know what I'm saying? All I'm really doing here is advocating for an intentional approach to the image-making process. When you raise the camera to the eye and are already conscious of which f/stop you want because you've been thinking about it from the second the scene revealed itself, you won't be looking through the viewfinder and wondering how deep to make your focus, you'll already be there. The photographer who goes out to create images, raises the camera

to the eye and then goes through a mental checklist - aperture, shutter, iso, etc - will find the moment gone before the shutter is pressed. You need to be so familiar with this stuff that the decision's all but made by the time you get the camera up to the eye.

If you're thinking this is a little more Zen than you expected, it probably is. When you're thinking about the technology of making an image, you're not fully present. Being so familiar and comfortable with it that it gets out of the way allows you to concentrate on seeing and creating, not fussing with gear. I hope I haven't lost you. I know a few of you are thinking you can't get this proficient. Nonsense. How? You train your imagination through familiarity.

CREATIVE EXERCISE

Look up from this page. Find something to look at that's about 4 feet away. Now pretend you're looking through a camera and a 50mm lens. See it? Now imagine you've set the aperture to 2.8. What does it look like? Move your eyes, what would things look like if you moved your imagined focus point with your gaze? Now set the lens to f/5.6, f/8.0, f/22. All I'm asking you to do is use your imagination. If you can't do it there's a good chance it means you don't spend enough time with your actual camera to your face, or looking at actual photographs. If you can't do it with your imagination, you won't be able to do it intuitively because your intuition is not yet trained. I don't want to be prescriptive about this, we all learn, work, & create differently. But you might want to spend some time playing with each of your lenses; becoming so familiar with the depth of field that results from each aperture at varying focus distances, that your imagination has something with which to work.

SHUTTER SPEED

Everything I just discussed in regards to Depth of Field applies to shutter speed as well. Imagine yourself in a courtyard as I was last year in India. You're high in the Himalaya visiting an ancient Buddhist monastery. Acolytes, young monks-in-training, are running back and forth across the courtyard as they fetch tea. You shoot one of them at 1/1000 of second, holding the camera still as you do. You shoot one of them at 1/15 of a second, panning the camera with them as they run. And you shoot another at 1/15 but this time you keep the camera stationary. Can you picture it? Too exotic? Try it in your head with your 8-year old playing soccer. What is important is that you have a familiarity with the brushes and paints of your craft, and that's all aperture and shutter speed really are. They're choices, neither right nor wrong, that will have an affect on the look of the image, and therefore on whether you express yourself through it or not. One image (1/1000) will freeze the action, the other will blur it. Two totally different interpretations of the same scene. How do you know which one works for you? How do you pick one while it's all happening so fast? Again, the more familiar you are with this, the more your imagination can process this stuff without using the actual camera and looking at the resulting images, the better able you'll be to make those decisions based on experience and trained intuition, not consciously, in a panic, or through frantic trial and error.

To return to our question about why our photographs don't "look like that;" it's because we're not playing enough, experimenting enough. We're told early on that camera shake is bad (sometimes it is) and that we need a fast shutter speed to prevent a blurred subject. We're told a tripod is our best friend and, barring that, a good

stable stance while we shoot is desirable. And all that may be so at times, but no more true than had we learned the reverse - that we should shoot with lower shutter speeds to better express motion and capture more blur, or that we should eschew the tripod & the stable stance in favour of more limber postures, and the ability to move freely about the scene, to lie down, climb on things, pan the camera or spin it in a circle.

CREATIVE EXERCISE

I suggest you loosen your grip on the rules and the expectation of perfection. Go out and shoot for a whole week and never allow your shutter speed to go above 1/15. Spend an hour on a street corner and pan with the moving traffic. Heck, pan the opposite way. Go driving with a friend and shoot scenes as they go by (you should probably be in the passenger seat.) Now try something riskier; go shoot something your brain tells you must be sharp and frozen, and shoot it otherwise. You are doing this for a reason, not merely to adopt an anarchist's habits. You're doing this foolishness to become uninhibited about playing with motion in your photographs, introducing the unpredictable, and most importantly, adding another set of verbs to your visual language in a way that subverts the old lessons we once learned about not using them except on special occasions. I think we don't play with motion and the look of specific shutter speeds because we're scared. Scared of failure. Scared of images that aren't perfectly in focus. (How come we're not equally scared of creating boring, safe images?)

THINK DIFFERENTLY ABOUT YOUR OPTICS

Somewhere along the line I learned a bad lesson about lenses. I don't know if it was something someone said or just that I too easily bought into the ads in the photography magazines I poured over, but along the way I learned that you wanted different lenses based on how near or far you wanted to be from the subject. Want to shoot landscapes and get lots in? Wide lens. Want to shoot bears? Big - really big - lens. Not a bad way to learn, and it was easy for a while. Until I accidentally discovered compression and expansion and totally un-learned the lesson. Don't overlook this one, it's huge. One of the most significant things you can do to alter the look of your image is to choose your optics very specifically based on the look you are going for.

For a moment I'm going to make an assumption that you've not read *Within The Frame*. Some of you will have and so this will be a repeat, and for that I ask your indulgence so the rest of the class can catch up. Make spitballs in the corner for a few minutes, this won't take long.

OK, here's your remedial lesson in lens behaviour, and like I said at the beginning, this is just an introduction to the subject, and invitation to explore it further with other resources or, best of all, on your own with your camera and a heavy sack of lenses.

Given the importance of optics in shaping the light as it comes into the camera, picking the right one for the right image is no less important than a painter picking the right brush. There's no right or wrong brush, just brushes that work better or less well to accomplish certain effects. Long lenses benefit from an optical effect we

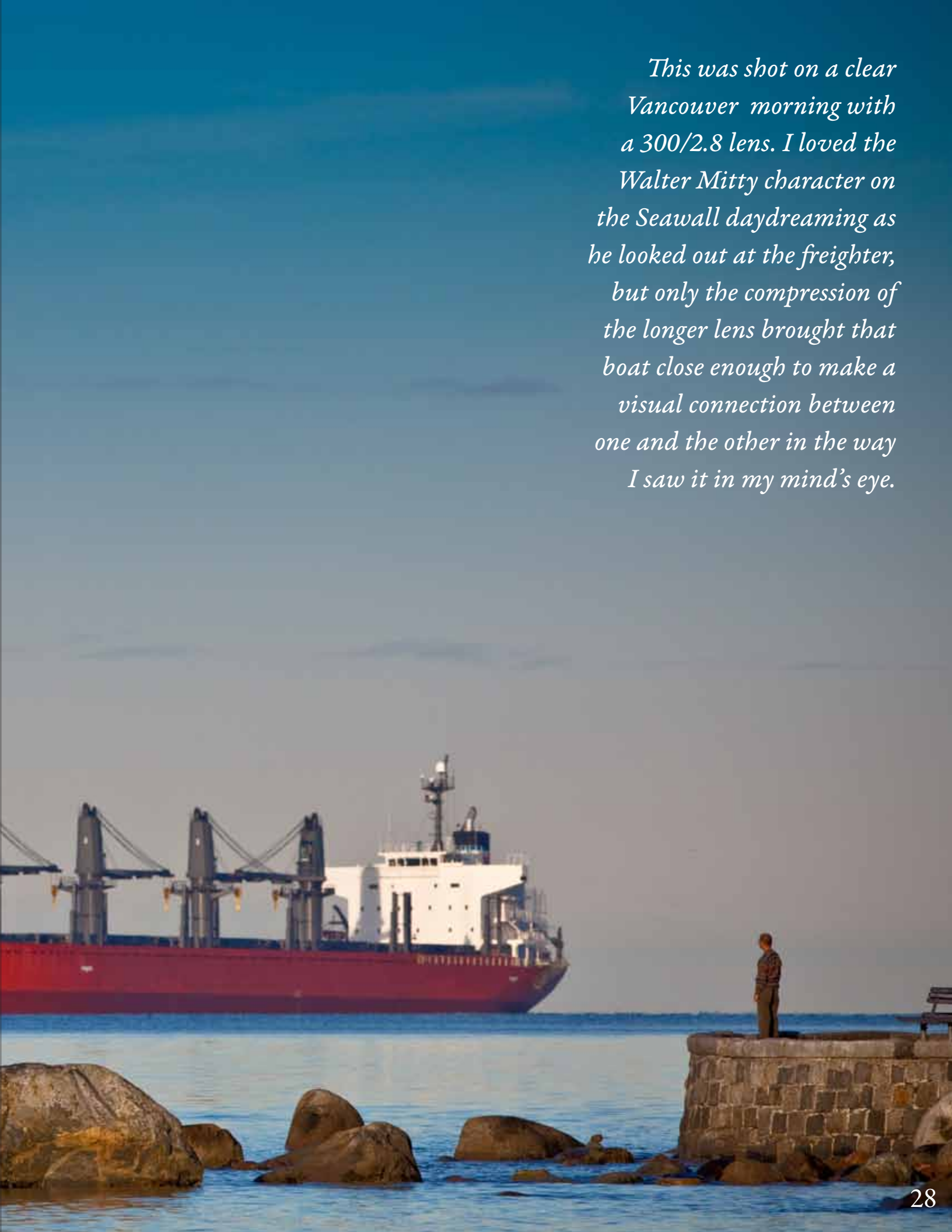
call compression. You know how you look through a 200mm lens and see that the distant duck looks really close? Well compression brings all elements closer to each other in the image, not just the duck closer to you. Look again. Not only does that duck appear closer to you, but the forest in the background also appears to be closer to the duck. The distance between the foreground and background are compressed, hence the name.

Compression works on more than ducks. Used well, it can bring a pleasing look to portraits. And in conjunction with a shallow depth of field, it can give a very specific look to the image, one often used in catalogues and magazines. Imagine this. You're photographing a child on the beach as she plays in the surf. You're close and you have a 50mm lens on. The shot's lovely. It's fine. But you want to change up the look. Lots of ways you could do it. One of them is to put a 200mm lens on. "Whoa! Kid's too close. What the heck am I meant to do with this long lens? This isn't going to work at all! What kind of sucker do you think I am, duChemin?" Point taken. I was crazy to suggest it. But you could try backing up. Back up until the child is the same size she was within the frame before you indulged this crazy idea. Logic says it's the same shot, but knowing what you know about compression you know that it can't be. The elements within the frame, from front to back, will all be closer to one another, and if you've shot this at f/2.8 it's bound to be a pretty narrow, and really pleasing, zone of focus. Sure, you have to back up a few yards. Walk all the way down the beach for all it matters, our guiding question is "how can I get my images to look like that?" not "how can I get the same aesthetic without working for it?"

The other result of the longer lens is the narrower angle of view; so there's less background to worry about. Look at a good deal of the

work you love and I suspect they all share a simplicity in their conception. Photographers trying to create one great image don't try to cram a million things into it. Of course there are exceptions, but the elements in a single image all get to speak with more power the fewer of them there are. A narrow angle of view will help with this. Since I started playing with longer lenses and taking advantage of their compression and narrow angle of view, I've never done so much backing up, never shot so fearlessly wide open (wider aperture like /2.8), but I've also never been so happy with my images.

Wide lenses do the opposite. They expand the perceived relationship between elements, they exaggerate lines and pull people into the scene. They are very different from longer lenses and therefore give a totally different aesthetic. It might be this reason I tend to shoot in the extreme ends of the focal lengths. 17-24mm and 85-300mm, both extremes give a very specific look. I see the world in 50mm everyday, so it's not that voice I'm looking to use in my photography, but a different one. I'm not going to teach you to use wide lenses, just want to stir the paint for you. If you've ever found yourself thinking, "well I can't use a 200mm lens, I want to shoot landscapes," then you need to undo that thinking. Lenses aren't application-specific, they're behaviour-specific. Sure a 300mm might be thought of more as a sports lens or a wildlife lens, but why? Why should it not instead have a place in our minds as an isolation lens for its ability to isolate distant elements, or a compression lens for its ability to pull foregrounds and backgrounds together? Why shouldn't we think of a wide-angle lens as an inclusion lens, one that draws viewers more into the scene? The more we think about our optics in terms of their behaviours and the aesthetics they produce, and less about pigeonholing them into applications, the more creative and free we might be with them.



This was shot on a clear Vancouver morning with a 300/2.8 lens. I loved the Walter Mitty character on the Seawall daydreaming as he looked out at the freighter, but only the compression of the longer lens brought that boat close enough to make a visual connection between one and the other in the way I saw it in my mind's eye.

MOVE THE FRAME MOVE THE CONTENTS

The moment we take a photograph we engage in the difficult task of translating the 3 dimensional world into a 2 dimensional one. Among the difficulties of this is that, while we experience the world in 3 dimensions, we're also always moving - or it's moving around us. The moment we translate a scene into two dimensions, the ability to experience and explore that scene is significantly reduced.

What looked and felt one way in a 3 dimensional scene, will look and feel another in only 2 dimensions. So while the camera will translate 3 dimensions into 2, we need to help it if there is going to be any interpretation.

That is to say, if we want the image to say something specific, to look a certain way, then translation alone is not sufficient. Lens and camera-settings choices are part of this act of interpretation. So is our own position in relation to the others, because the position of the camera changes the relationship of other elements to each other and forever locks in the vantage point of the viewer.

Look at the illustrations on the facing page. These illustrate a couple possible frames of two people. Moving yourself, and the camera, changes the image significantly.

While it's normal to move about to "get everything into the frame," it's more important - if you're chasing the look - to move about in order to place elements exactly where you want them. *(cont'd next page.)*

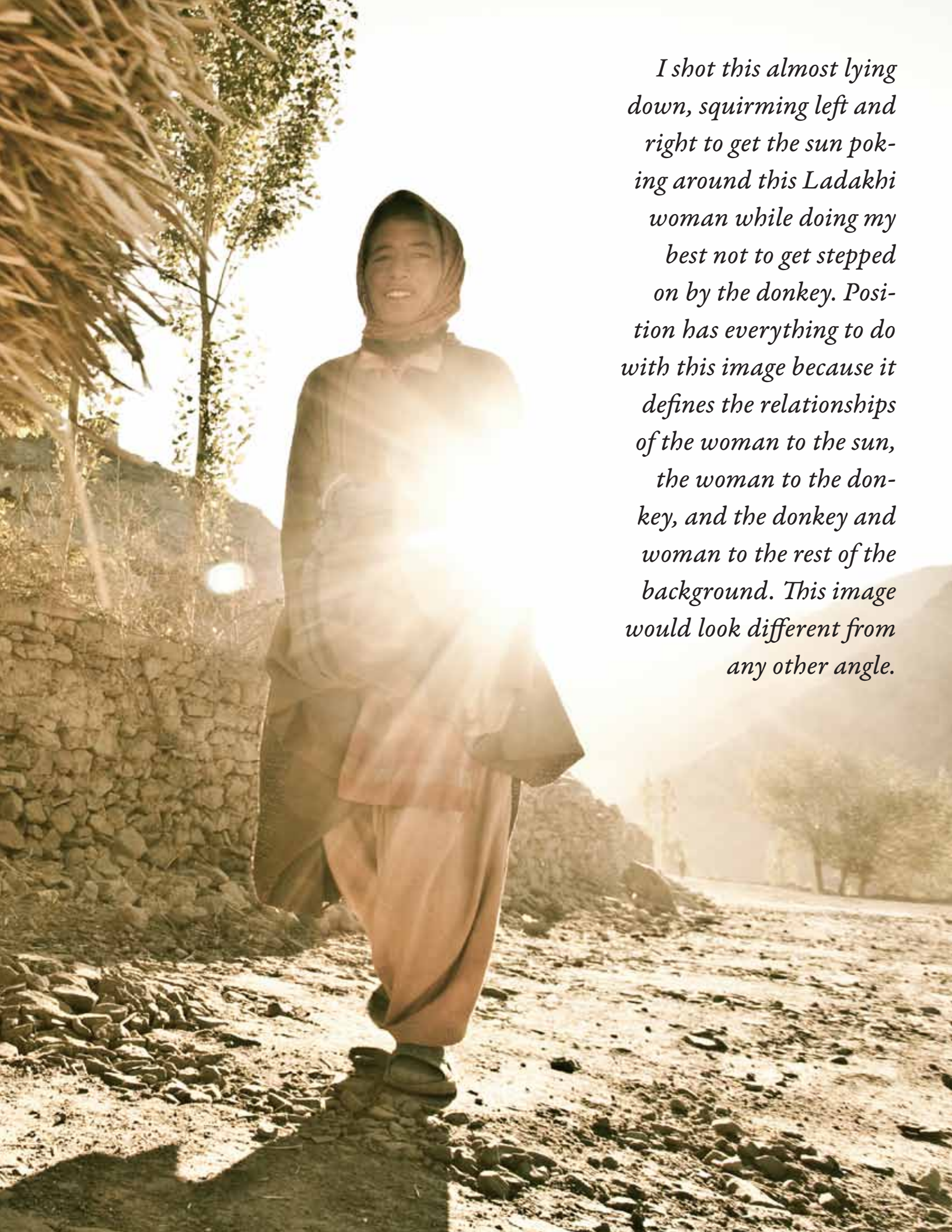
Right: look at the way the elements, including the background and horizon, change as your own position changes. It's neither right nor wrong, but it ***looks*** *different.*

camera neutral
camera moved left
camera moved high
& pointing down
camera moved low
&pointing up

I'm all for creativity, so this isn't a rule - shoot from any angle you like - but the more intentionally you choose your angle - up/down, left/right, back/forth - the more control you will have over the look of the image.

CREATIVE EXERCISE

Go spend an hour with some kids and shoot them at their eye level. Or do the same with your dog. Now consider how your own angle changes the background present in the scene. One of my suggestions for improving your images is to put a great foreground in front of a great background. Using this same exercise, play with your position and point of view to consciously choose better backgrounds - to look more at a distant forest instead of down onto a field of dying grass, for example. Or to swing around and in so-doing to eliminate a distracting, burned-out grey sky. In the end, this is all about making intentional decisions about the look you choose for an image; beginning to pay attention to the results of your own physical positioning will go a long way to making stronger decisions and stronger images.



I shot this almost lying down, squirming left and right to get the sun poking around this Ladakhi woman while doing my best not to get stepped on by the donkey. Position has everything to do with this image because it defines the relationships of the woman to the sun, the woman to the donkey, and the donkey and woman to the rest of the background. This image would look different from any other angle.

THE LOOK OF LIGHT IS EVERYTHING

In my ebook TEN, number 7 was "Look to the Light," a suggestion that considering the quality of light would improve your photography and I think it's so important it's worth elaborating on. It's become so important to me because a couple years ago I committed one year to looking at, thinking about, and studying light. I read some solid books, but mostly it was a year of intentional observation. I looked at a lot of photographs and studied the light. I played with lights and gels and reflectors and diffusers and all kinds of lighting stuff. And I kept asking myself, as is my habit - why? Why does the light look like that? Where's it coming from? What's it bouncing off? What colour and shape is the light? Where's the logic? And most importantly, how can I photograph it?

If there's a theme in this book that I hope you pick up on it's the theme of intentionally thinking about and practicing this stuff. Light isn't some accidental thing you just stumble upon, some magic occurrence that moves in inexplicable ways. It can be predicted and it can be, often, manipulated. It's what makes Rembrandt's paintings stand out to so many people - his use of light. Light shapes subjects, it gives them depth and texture. Light creates mood. Light backlights dust motes dancing in the harvest air. But if you don't know to look for it, you could go on shooting a front-lit scene without ever walking around and seeing the way the light falls from the side and from the back. Have you ever noticed the way light plays on water differently depending on the time of day, the weather, and the angle at which you see it? Have

you ever noticed the way the light bounces off that glass apartment building at 4pm only to fill areas with gold light for a brief 20 minutes at the beginning of the afternoon commute?

I've got no secret here. That'll disappoint some. I'm encouraging you to engage in that one activity that should be common among us - active and keen observation. Look at light, take copious mental notes. Observe how that sunbeam streaming into the living room backlights the cat and rims her with light. Imagine yourself shooting it. If you underexpose it your subject might not be the cat at all but the outline of fur and light.

Go out at sunset and leave your camera at home. Instead, just watch the light as it goes down, watch what the light does as it goes down, stops lighting the lake but instead lights the clouds from underneath, see how the light under those clouds reflects back to the lake and colours it. Light is dynamic, always changing, and the more you observe it, understand it, and marvel at it, the better your images when your camera comes to your eye.

The three images on the right were all taken in different light on the same day in Thailand. The top image in the early morning, the middle at sunset and the last one at dusk, 5 minutes after the image in the middle. Almost the same scene, but very different images. Only the light has changed.

THE POWER OF GESTURE

I recently heard Jay Maisel say that everything in an image has gesture. But it's not an easy idea to explain. We generally think of gesture as a human activity, often as something done with the hands or face. But it's not humans or even living things alone that have gesture. Gesture is as easily found in the leading lines of a tree branch or the shape of a flock of birds. Gesture is the implication of a path that leads towards the horizon or a ladder leaning against a wall and leading the eye up. It's the swirled shape of a water-worn rock on the shore. It's shape and lines and dimension.

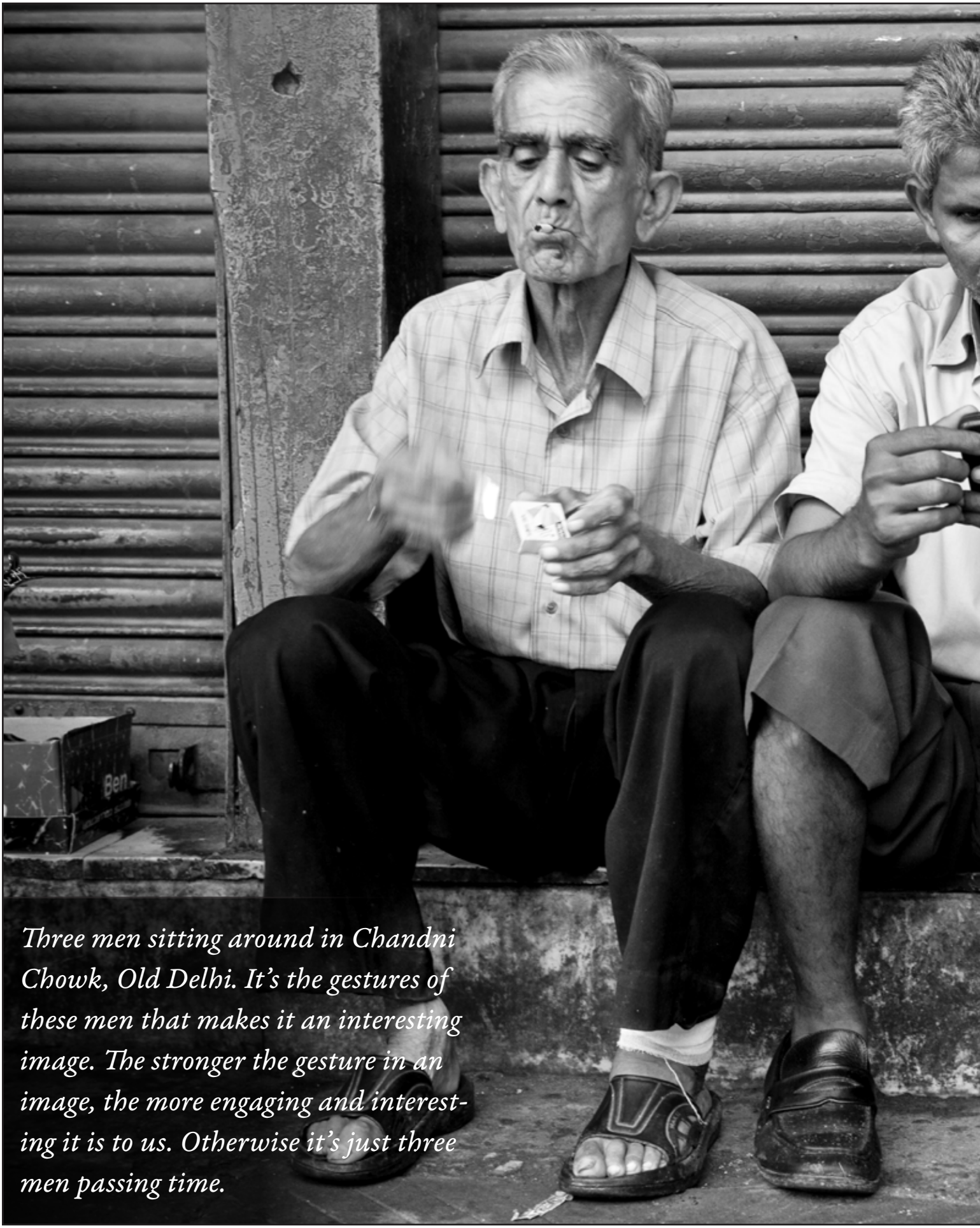
If it seems like I'm grasping to try to define it, I am. I use a camera because I'm more comfortable with images than words sometimes. And I think that's the key - we create images to say things, to express ourselves where words are insufficient, and gesture is that part of the communication within an image that is not light or colour. This is the equivalent of body language within an image. Human gesture is body language. Photographic gesture is communication by lines, forms, and implied shapes.

I list the power of gesture among the ways in which we can affect the aesthetic of an image because I think we often don't intentionally think about gesture enough. We see what we see and we shoot it, but that reaction can be honed by consider-

ing that some gesture is more powerful than others. We can do this by choosing the best optics, shutter speed and aperture, but we can also do it by waiting. Imagine we're photographing a person engaged in a conversation with a friend over coffee. Imagine that we're shooting at 1/100 of a second over a period of 5 minutes without ever stopping. That's 30,000 frames. Most of those frames will be very different from each other, but not every one of those frames will have captured telling gestures about those two friends and their conversation. Some frames might be boring, some misleading, and some might be incredibly well timed - frames in which the physical gestures of the two friends, the composition of the image, and the way you see this scene, all come together. That's what Cartier-Bresson seemed to be talking about when he coined the term "decisive moment."

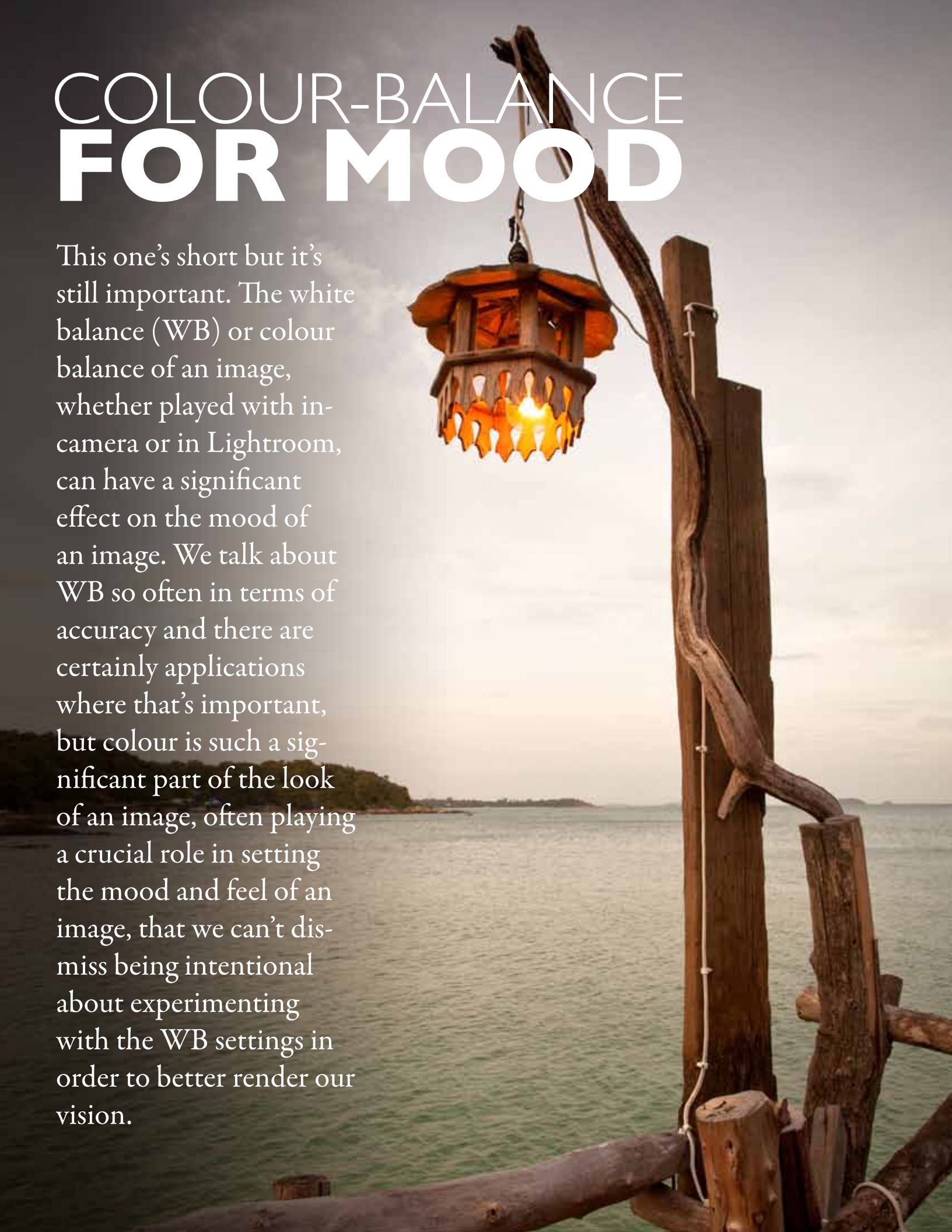
You have control over the gesture - human, animate, or otherwise - in the image. Where that gesture is created by a moving thing, it's up to you to anticipate it, to catch it at its apex. You know how two frames of a portrait can be so similar but in one the smile is genuine, and in the other something in the eye changes, it goes dull or looks at the camera instead of through it to the viewer? That's the time it takes for gesture to change. It requires anticipating, waiting, and where possible, pursuing.

Why settle for good gesture when you can have great gesture? Something revealing or new or surprising? Where the gesture comes from something inanimate - the lines of a building, the form of a feather - it's up to you to compose the image in such a way that the gesture formed on that print is the most intentional one possible, and only you can say what that is.



Three men sitting around in Chandni Chowk, Old Delhi. It's the gestures of these men that makes it an interesting image. The stronger the gesture in an image, the more engaging and interesting it is to us. Otherwise it's just three men passing time.

COLOUR-BALANCE FOR MOOD



This one's short but it's still important. The white balance (WB) or colour balance of an image, whether played with in-camera or in Lightroom, can have a significant effect on the mood of an image. We talk about WB so often in terms of accuracy and there are certainly applications where that's important, but colour is such a significant part of the look of an image, often playing a crucial role in setting the mood and feel of an image, that we can't dismiss being intentional about experimenting with the WB settings in order to better render our vision.

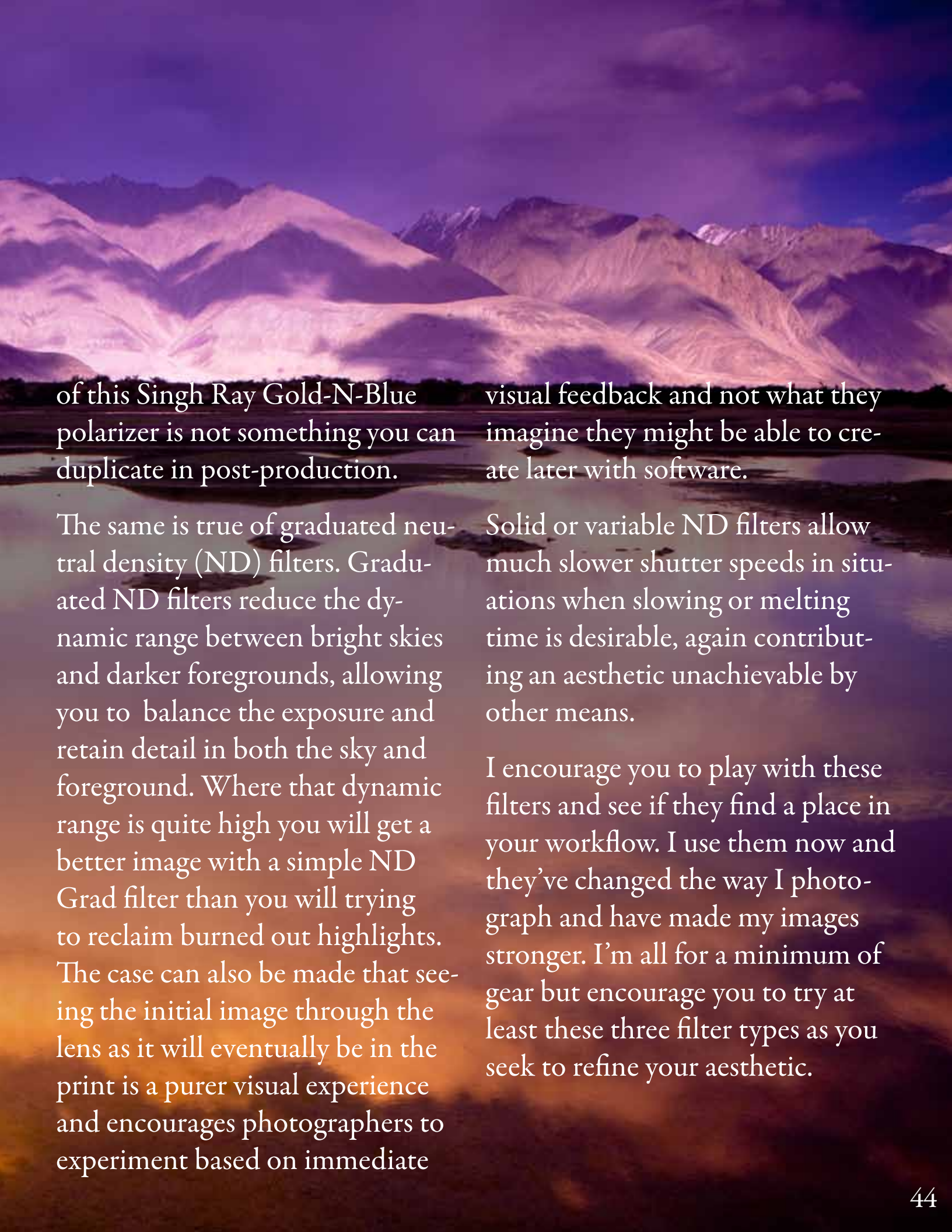
I shot this on Ko Samet in Thailand and later rendered two versions with different WB settings in Lightroom. The same effect could have come by setting my WB in the camera. How is less important than why: a change in WB is a change to the aesthetic and therefore the feel of the photograph.

FILTERS & DIGITAL CAPTURE

I know that when people switch to digital, if they ever shot film to begin with, they begin to drink the KoolAid of the supremacy of digital, not the least of which is the fact that where film photographers required filters to create the aesthetics of certain images, digital did not. Anything that could be done with a filter on the front of the lens could, it is often reasoned, be accomplished on the back end in Photoshop or Lightroom. Perhaps, and for some aesthetics that's correct. But to get rid of your filters entirely, as I did, is to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater.

It should be remembered that filters change the light entering the camera. They don't merely colour it. They change the light before it hits the sensor and this has ramifications in a couple places where the aesthetic is affected and the effect can not be reliably or easily duplicated in the digital darkroom.

The first case relates to polarizing filters. I know, you can darken a sky in Lightroon. But that's not all a polarizer is good for and if you've ever tried removing reflections from the surface of water in Photoshop you know that. Polarizers can change the look of an image and can be the difference between a good shot and a great one. Or the difference between a mediocre shot and a decent one as is the case of the background image on this page. It was shot in the Nubra valley in Ladakh, India and the effect



of this Singh Ray Gold-N-Blue polarizer is not something you can duplicate in post-production.

The same is true of graduated neutral density (ND) filters. Graduated ND filters reduce the dynamic range between bright skies and darker foregrounds, allowing you to balance the exposure and retain detail in both the sky and foreground. Where that dynamic range is quite high you will get a better image with a simple ND Grad filter than you will trying to reclaim burned out highlights. The case can also be made that seeing the initial image through the lens as it will eventually be in the print is a purer visual experience and encourages photographers to experiment based on immediate visual feedback and not what they imagine they might be able to create later with software.

Solid or variable ND filters allow much slower shutter speeds in situations when slowing or melting time is desirable, again contributing an aesthetic unachievable by other means.

I encourage you to play with these filters and see if they find a place in your workflow. I use them now and they've changed the way I photograph and have made my images stronger. I'm all for a minimum of gear but encourage you to try at least these three filter types as you seek to refine your aesthetic.

MIX IT UP

Everything I've explained so far is leading to this one point. While each of the preceeding lessons is important on its own, it is the creative combination of all of them that is perhaps the most difficult and which leads to an unique aesthetic or style.

This is the photographer's version of mixing hues on a palette - the choice to combine the spatial compression of a certain lens, from an angle that ensures - rather than avoids - lens flare, and with a combination of shutter and aperture settings that brings about a look that would have gone unseen had any of the other numerous combinations been chosen. Here is where we play & discover our voice. I can't give you better advice than to alert you to the power of intentionally-chosen combinations that create an aesthetic that best says what you want it to - a string of well-chosen words from your vocabulary that together create the poem that best expresses what's inside. All you can do is play with the mix until you find ones that do it for you, and even then, keep playing with the mix as your craft grows to keep pace with your vision.

CREATIVE EXERCISE

You aren't likely to add to the basic visual language a camera & lens are able to speak; instead, being creative with the aesthetic of an image lies in your ability to combine existing conventions & looks to suit your imagination. Find a dozen images made by someone else and pick apart the combination of elements that make it what it is. Don't worry about why your images don't look like that, instead *figure out why those images do.* Break it down. Write it out. Reverse engineer the shot. Consider it. As you become more thoughtful of others' images, you'll become more thoughtful about your own.

-Shallow depth of field. F/2.0 or faster?

-Great use of wide angle lens (24mm?) that exaggerates lines & foreground.

-Cool use of evening light, how did the photographer do it? Reflector?

-Warm tones - nice! WB?

-Shutter speed freezing action. 1/1000+?

Conclusion

If there were a secret to creating photographs that looked the way you see them in your imagination it would be this: to consciously be aware of your vision, to be intuitively aware of every effect of your technology & technique upon the look of the image, and to know how to combine the two. Of course that's not the answer most of us want to hear; it carries with it the implication of a great deal of (a) navel-gazing and self-awareness, (b) time and energy spent intentionally learning to understand the visual language our technology is speaking, and (c) time, effort, and mistakes made along the journey of figuring out how to express our inner vision with the gear in our hands.

What I *wanted* to say is that there is no secret. But I think there is. Not in the sense of it being a mystery or some archane knowledge for which you need to know the secret handshake, but in the sense of it being uncommon knowledge. Or I'm wrong and the knowledge is actually common enough but too seldom acted upon. I'd prefer to think the former than think the latter and have to live with the implication that we're not ignorant of the information, just lazy. Because if there's a common theme in the things I write, it's that this is hard. This takes work. It takes experimentation and failure and a great deal of intentionality in our approach to this craft. That's the secret. Pretty disappointing secret, eh?

The good news is that's all it takes. Sure, some people have a greater natural disposition towards creativity; it's easier for them. Some people are blessed with uncommon vision and insight and that

translates to their work. But most of us travel this photographic journey one hard-earned frame at a time.

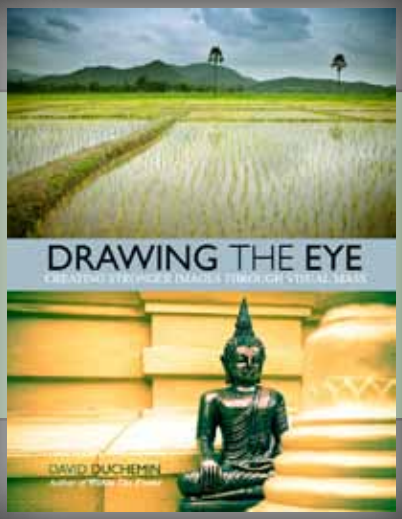
What I said at the beginning I want to also reiterate here at the end. When it comes to the look of an image, there is almost nothing the great masters have accomplished that you and I can't also accomplish. It takes study, and thousands upon thousands of frames that we shoot, study, and learn from before moving on to the next thousand. Be intentional about this, be passionate, and don't ever merely *adopt* someone else's specific look or aesthetic instead of *adapting* it to your own vision.

As Joe McNally says, this is a journey without a destination. We keep learning not to "get there" but for the joy of being wherever we are, camera in hand, chipping away at this hoping to uncover our vision, learn our craft, and find a place where one is increasingly expressed by the other.

Peace.

David duChemin
Vancouver, 2009

IMPROVE YOUR CRAFT
EXPRESS YOUR VISION
(ALL WITHOUT BUYING MORE GEAR)



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